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Women try to boost businesses online

By Yolanda Putman Staff Writer

A group of local businesswomen has joined to form an online marketing network that builds relationships among its members, other businesses and the community.

"We're merging the best of traditional networking strategies like meetings and service activities with 21st Century online marketing technology," said Tekelia C. Kelly, a former education systems analyst at UnumProvident who started the venture. Mrs. Kelly is owner and publisher of Sisters-In-Business.Com, a marketing and advertising firm that offers business development such as computer technology training and a bartering network.

The firm also offers social events and online services such as shopping on SIBay, an online shopping and selling portal for local Chattanooga, and a business directory of local female-owned businesses.

Other founding members of the network include business owners Sharon Kelly, Carol Miller, Deborah Gunn, Virginia Yarbrough and Dorothea Johnetta Johnson.

"We saw a lot of women trying to do business independently, but they were operating in a circle with one person not knowing about the other. There needs to be a network," Mrs. Kelly said.

In less than a month, the group has attracted more than a dozen prominent businesswomen, including Melanie Brooks, who owns Melanie's at Brainerd Road; Forestine Watson Haynes, executive director of the 28th Community Development Corp.; and Diane Mason, who has been an entrepreneur in Chattanooga for more than 30 years.

All of them paid a \$100 fee to become members. With the membership comes promises of benefits such as a quarterly newsletter, billboard advertisements and business training workshops.

Black women in Chattanooga have buying power but they need to be more aware of it, said Strut Fashions owner Mrs. Mason.

"This community needs a push, and I think Sisters-In-Business is good medicine for it," Mrs. Mason said. "We need to be conscious that we have a big part in the economy here and we need to make that work for us."

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Mary L. Williams, who has owned the Floral Gallery for 19 years, joined the organization the first time she went to a membership meeting.

"I joined right away," she said. "This is an opportunity to bond and fellowship with other women in business, and there is a lot of networking involved that can help women."

Sisters-In-Business is open to "sisters" of any race who are interested in business, Mrs. Kelly said.

"When any part of the community prospers, the whole community prospers," she said.

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IF YOU GO

What: Sisters-In-Business membership meeting When: 5:30 p.m. Thursday Where: Sharon's Adult Day Center at 2000 Raulston Avenue Cost: Meetings are free and open to the public. Membership is \$100 For more information call Mrs. Kelly (423) 421-5646 or visit www.sisters-in-business.com on Web.

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